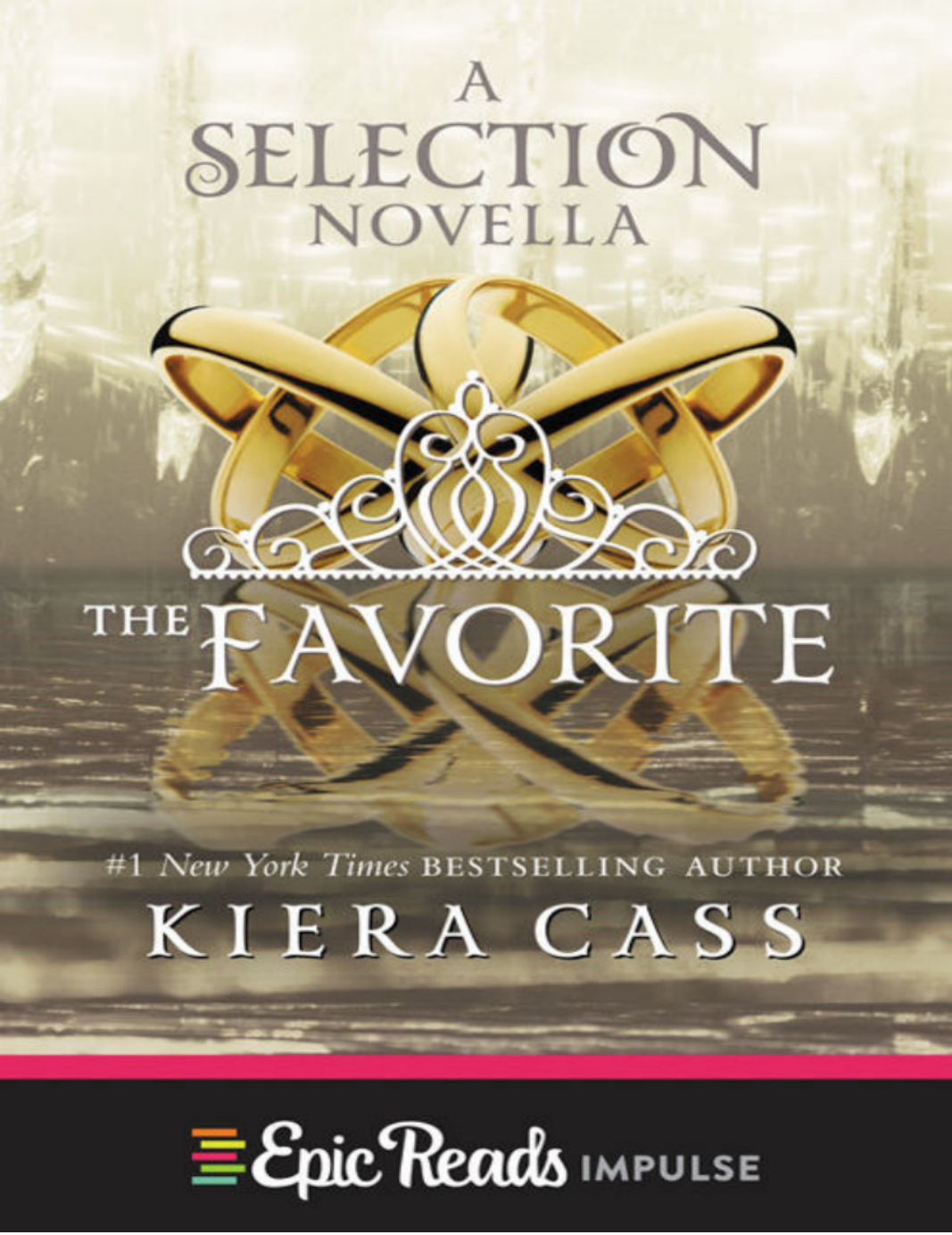

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PART I

I PULLED THE TOP LAYERS of my dress a little tighter over my shoulders. Carter was quiet now, and his silence sent deeper chills through my body than the lack of heat in the palace cells did. It had been horrific to hear his grunts of pain as the guards beat the hope out of him, but at least then I knew he was breathing.

I shivered as I drew my knees closer to my chest. Another tear slid down my cheek, and I was grateful for it if only because it was warm on my skin. We knew. We knew it could end this way. And still we met. How could we have stopped?

I wondered how we would die. A noose? A bullet? Something much more elaborate and painful?

I couldn't help wishing that Carter's silence meant he was already gone. Or if not, that he would go first. I'd rather have my last memory be of his death than suffer knowing that his last memory was of mine. Even now, alone in this cell, all I wanted was for his pain to stop.

Something stirred in the hallway, and my heart started racing. Was this it? Was this the end? I shut my eyes quickly, trying to hold back my tears. How had this happened? How had I gone from being one of the beloved members of the Selection to being labeled a traitor, awaiting my punishment? Oh, Carter . . . Carter, what have we done?

I didn't think I was a vain person. Still, nearly every day after breakfast, I felt like I had to go back to my room and touch up my makeup before heading to the Women's Room. I knew it was silly—Maxon wouldn't even see me again until the evening. And at that point, of course, I'd reapply all my makeup and change my outfit anyway.

Not that anything I was doing seemed to be having much of an effect. Maxon was polite and friendly, but I didn't think I had a connection with him the way some of the other girls did. Was there something wrong with me?

While I was certainly having a wonderful time in the palace, I kept feeling like there was something the other girls—well, some of them at least —understood that I didn't. Before being Selected, I had thought that I was funny and pretty and smart. But now that I was in the middle of a bunch of other girls whose daily mission was to impress one particular boy, I felt dim and dull and less. I realized I should have paid much more attention to my friends back home who had always seemed to be in a rush when it came to finding a husband and settling down. They had spent their time

talking about clothes, and makeup, and boys—while I had paid more mind to my tutors' lectures. I felt like I had missed some important lesson, and now I was woefully behind.

No. *I merely needed to keep trying, that was all. I'd memorized everything from Silvia's history lesson earlier this week. I'd even written some of it down to keep handy if I forgot something. I wanted Maxon to think that I was smart and well-rounded. I also wanted him to think I was beautiful, so it felt like these trips to my room were necessary.*

Did Queen Amberly do this? She seemed effortlessly stunning all the time.

I paused on the stairs to look at my shoe. One of the heels seemed to be snagging on the carpet. I didn't see anything, so I moved on, eager to get to the Women's Room.

I flicked my hair over my shoulder as I approached the first floor and went back to focusing on whether there was more that I was supposed to be doing. I really wanted to win. I hadn't spent much time with Maxon, but he seemed kind and funny and—

"Ahh!" My heel snagged on the edge of the stair, and I fell with a smack onto the marble floor. "Ow," I muttered.

"Miss!" I looked up to see a guard running toward me. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Nothing injured but my pride," I said, blushing.

"I don't know how ladies walk in those shoes. It's a miracle the whole lot of you don't have broken ankles all the time."

I giggled as he offered me his hand.

"Thank you." I started brushing my hair back and smoothing out my dress.

"Any time. You're sure you aren't hurt?" He looked me over anxiously, searching for scrapes or cuts.

"My hip hurts a little where I fell, but otherwise I feel perfect." Which was true.

"Maybe we should take you to the hospital wing, just to be safe."

"No, really," I insisted. "I'm fine."

He sighed. "Would you do me a favor and go anyway? If you were hurt and I didn't do something to help, I'd feel awful about it." His blue eyes were terribly convincing. "And I'd be willing to bet the prince would want you to go."

He made a fair point. "All right," I ceded. "I'll go."

He grinned, his smile ever so slightly crooked. "Okay then." He scooped me up, and I gasped in shock.

"I don't think I need this," I protested.

"All the same." He started walking, so I couldn't get down. "Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but you're Miss Marlee, right?"

"Yes, I am."

He kept grinning, and I couldn't help but smile back at him. "I've been working hard to keep all of you straight. Honestly, I don't think I was the best in training, and I have no idea how I ended up in the palace. But I want to make sure they don't regret their decision, so I'm trying to at least learn names. That way if someone needs something, I'll know who they're talking about."

I liked the way he spoke. It was as if he was telling a story, even though he was simply stating a fact about himself. His face was animated and his voice alight.

"Well, you're already going above and beyond," I encouraged. "And don't be so down on yourself. I'm sure you were an excellent trainee if you were placed here. Your commanders must have seen great potential in you."

"You're too kind. Will you remind me where you're from?"

"Kent."

"Oh, I'm from Allens."

"Really?" Allens was just east of Kent, above Carolina. We were neighbors in a way.

He nodded as he walked. "Yes, ma'am. This is the first time I've ever been out of my province. Well, second if you count training."

"Same here. It's kind of hard getting used to the weather."

"It is! I'm waiting for fall to kick in, but I'm not sure they even have fall here."

"I know what you mean. Summer's nice, but not every day."

"Exactly," he said firmly. "Can you imagine how silly Christmas must look?"

I sighed. "It can't possibly be as good without snow." I meant that. I dreamed about winter all year. It was my favorite season.

"Nowhere close," he agreed.

I didn't know why I was smiling so much. Maybe it was because this conversation felt so easy. I'd never had an easy time speaking to a boy. Admittedly, I hadn't had a lot of practice, but it was nice to think that maybe I didn't need as much work as I had thought.

As we approached the entrance of the hospital wing he slowed.

"Would you mind putting me down?" I asked. "I don't want them thinking I've broken a leg or something."

He chuckled. "Not at all."

He set me down and opened the door for me. Inside, a nurse was sitting at a desk.

The officer spoke for me. "Lady Marlee took a little tumble in the hall. Probably nothing, but we just wanted to be safe."

The nurse stood right up, looking happy to have something to do. "Oh, Lady Marlee, I hope you're not too hurt."

"No, just a little sore here," I said, touching my hip.

"I'll check you out right away. Thank you so much, officer. You can go back to your post."

The guard tipped his head to her and started to leave. Just before the doors closed, he gave me a wink and a crooked smile, and I was left there, grinning like an idiot.

I was pulled back to the present as the voices in the hallway grew louder. I heard the guards' greetings overlapping one another as they all said one word: *Highness*.

Maxon was here.

I rushed to the small gated window of my cell. I watched as the door to the cell across the hallway—Carter's cell—was opened, and Maxon was escorted in. I strained to hear what was said, but though I could make out Maxon's voice, I couldn't decipher any words. I also heard weak mutters in reply and knew they were from Carter. He was awake. And alive.

I simultaneously sighed and shivered, then lifted the tulle back over my shoulders.

After a few minutes Carter's cell door opened again, and I watched as Maxon approached my cell. The guards let him in and shut the door behind him. He took one look at me and gasped.

"Good Lord, what have they done to you?" Maxon walked over, unbuttoning his suit coat as he did.

"Maxon, I'm so sorry," I cried.

He slid off his coat and wrapped it around me. "Did the guards tear your costume? Did they harm you?"

"I never meant to be unfaithful to you. I never wanted to hurt you."

He lifted his hands to my cheeks. "Marlee, listen to me. Did the guards hit you?"

I shook my head. "One ripped my wings off when he was pushing me in the door, but they haven't done anything else."

He sighed, clearly relieved. What a good man he was, still caring about my well-being even after he'd found out about me and Carter.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered again.

Maxon's hands dropped to my shoulders. "I'm only just starting to understand how pointless it is to fight being in love. I certainly don't blame you for it."

I stared into his kind eyes. "We tried to stop ourselves. I promise we did. But I love him. I'd marry him tomorrow . . . if we wouldn't be dead by then." I dropped my head, sobbing uncontrollably. I wanted to be more of a lady about this, to accept my punishment with grace. But it felt so unfair, like everything was being taken away from me before it had even truly been mine in the first place.

Maxon began rubbing my back gently. “You’re not going to die.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “What?”

“You haven’t been sentenced to death.”

I let out a rush of air and embraced him. “Thank you! Thank you so much! It’s more than we deserve!”

“Stop! Stop!” he insisted, tugging at my arms.

I stepped back, embarrassed for breaking protocol after everything else I’d done.

“You haven’t been sentenced to death,” he repeated, “but you still have to be punished.” He looked at the ground and shook his head. “I’m sorry, Marlee, but you’re both going to be publicly caned in the morning.”

He seemed to be having trouble maintaining eye contact with me; if I hadn’t known better, I would have thought he understood the pain we were in for. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I tried to prevent this, but my father is insistent that the palace needs to save face; and since the footage of you two together has already been circulated, there’s nothing I can do to change his mind.”

I cleared my throat. “How many times?”

“Fifteen. I think the plan is to make it much worse for Carter than you, but either way, it’s going to be incredibly painful. I know it sometimes causes people to black out. I’m so, so sorry, Marlee.” He looked disappointed in himself. And all I could think of was how good he was.

I stood up straighter, trying to show him that I could handle this. “You come here offering me my life and the life of the man I love, and you apologize? Maxon, I’ve never been so grateful.”

“They’re going to make you Eights,” he said. “Everyone is going to watch it.”

“But Carter and I will be together, right?”

He nodded.

“Then what else can I ask for? I’ll take a caning for that. I’d take his as well if that was possible.”

Maxon smiled sadly. “Carter literally just pleaded to take yours for you.”

I smiled, too, as more tears—happier tears—filled my eyes. “I’m not surprised.”

Maxon shook his head again. “I keep thinking that I have a grasp on what it means to be in love, and then I see you two, each asking to spare the other, and I wonder if I understand anything at all.”

I gripped his coat tighter around me. “You do. I know you do.” I stared at him. “Her, on the other hand . . . she might need time.”

He chuckled quietly. “She’s going to miss you. She used to encourage me to pursue you.”

"Only a true friend would try to get someone she cared about to become princess over herself. But I was never meant for you, or for the crown. I found my person."

"She said something to me once," he said slowly, "that I'll never forget. She said, 'True love is usually the most inconvenient kind.'"

I looked around my cell. "She was right."

We were silent for a few moments before I spoke again. "I'm scared."

He embraced me. "It will be over rather quickly. The buildup to the caning will be the worst part, but take your mind somewhere else while they're talking. And I will try to get you the best medicines, the ones they save for me, so that you heal faster." I started crying, frightened and thankful and a thousand other things. "For now, you need to get what sleep you can. I told Carter to rest as well. It will help." I nodded into his shoulder, and he pulled me tight.

"What did he say? Is he all right?"

"He's been beaten, but he's doing okay for now. He told me to tell you he loved you and to do whatever I asked."

I sighed, comforted by the words. "I'm in your debt forever."

Maxon didn't reply. He simply held me until I relaxed. Finally, he kissed my forehead and turned to leave.

"Good-bye," I whispered.

He smiled at me and knocked twice on the door, and a guard escorted him away.

I went back to my place by the wall and curled my legs up under my dress while I turned Maxon's coat into a makeshift blanket. I let myself drift back into my memories. . . .

Jada rubbed lotion into my skin, a ritual that I'd grown to love. Even though it was only just after dinner and I was nowhere close to being sleepy, her skilled hands running down my arms meant the workday was over and I could relax.

Today had been especially taxing. Besides having a bruise on my hip that I was supposed to be icing, the Report *had been stressful. Tonight had been our true introduction to the public, and Gavril asked us all questions about what we thought of the prince and what we missed about home and how we were getting along with one another. I sounded like a bird. Even though I tried to calm myself down, every answer made me notch my voice up another octave, I was so excited. I was sure Silvia would have something to say about that.*

Of course, I couldn't help comparing myself to everyone else. Tiny didn't do very well, so at least I wasn't at the absolute bottom. But it was hard to say who had done the best. Bariel was so comfortable in front of the camera, and so was Kriss. I wouldn't be surprised if they made it to the

Elite.

America was wonderful, too. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I realized now that I had never had friends below my caste. I felt like such a snob because of it. Ever since coming to the palace, America had been my closest confidante—and if I couldn't rank among the top contenders, I was thrilled that she was up there.

Of course, I knew anyone would be better for Maxon than Celeste. I still couldn't believe she ripped America's dress. And to know that she had gotten away with it, too, was so disheartening. I couldn't picture anyone telling Maxon what Celeste had done, which left Celeste free to go on torturing the rest of us. I understood she wanted to win—for goodness' sake, we all did—but she took things way too far. I couldn't stand her.

Thankfully, Jada's nimble fingers were working all the tension out of my neck, and Celeste began to fade away, along with my piercing voice and the aching posture and the list of worries that accompanied trying to become a princess.

When there was a knock on the door, I hoped it would be Maxon, though I knew that was a pointless hope. Maybe it would be America, and we could drink some tea on my balcony or take a walk in the gardens.

But when Nina answered the door, the officer from earlier was standing in the hallway. He peeked over Nina, not bothering with protocol.

"Miss Marlee! I came to check on you!" He seemed so excited to stop by, I had to laugh.

"Please come in." I stood from my vanity and walked over to the door. "Take a seat. I can have my maids bring us up some tea."

He shook his head. "I don't want to keep you too long. Just wanted to make sure you weren't crippled from that fall."

I thought he was keeping his hands behind his back to maintain a small level of formality, but it turned out he was simply hiding a bouquet of flowers, which he presented to me with a flourish.

"Aww!" I pulled the bouquet to my face. "Thank you!"

"It was nothing. I'm friendly with one of the gardeners, and he got these for me."

Nina came over quietly. "Shall I get a vase, miss?"

"Please," I replied, handing her the flowers. "So you know," I said, turning back to the officer, "I'm very well. A small bruise, but nothing serious. And I've learned a valuable lesson about high heels."

"That boots are far superior?"

I laughed again. "Of course. I'm planning on incorporating them into my wardrobe much more."

"You will be solely responsible for the new direction of palace fashion! And I can say I knew you when." He chuckled at his own joke, and we stood there smiling at each other. I got the feeling he didn't want to leave . . . and I realized I didn't want him to either. His smile was so warm, and I

felt more at ease with him than I had with anyone in a long time.

Unfortunately, he realized it would be odd for him to stay in my room, and he gave me a quick bow. "I guess I should go. I've got a long shift tomorrow."

I sighed. "In a sense, so do I."

He smiled. "Hope you get to feeling better, and I'm sure I'll see you around."

"I'm sure. And thanks for being so helpful today, Officer . . ." I looked to his badge. "Woodwork."

"Any time, Miss Marlee." He bowed again, then retreated into the hallway.

Shea closed the door gently behind him. "What a gentleman, to come and check on you," she commented.

"I know," Jada seconded. "Sometimes it's hit or miss with those guards, but this batch seems nice."

"He's certainly a good one," I said. "I should tell Prince Maxon about him. Maybe Officer Woodwork could be rewarded for his kindness."

Though I wasn't tired, I crawled into my bed. Turning in for the night meant the maid count went from three to one, and it was as alone as I could get. Nina walked over with a blue vase that looked beautiful with the yellow flowers.

"Set them here, please," I asked, and she put them right next to my bed.

I stared at the flowers as a smile played on my lips. Even though I had just suggested it, I knew I'd never tell the prince about Officer Woodwork. I wasn't sure why, but I knew I'd keep him to myself.

The creak of the door opening jerked me awake, and I stood up instantly, pulling Maxon's coat over my shoulders.

A guard walked in and didn't bother looking me in the eye. "Hands out."

I'd gotten so used to everyone adding "miss" to their sentences when they spoke to me that it took me a second to respond. Luckily, this guard didn't seem to be in the mood to punish me for my slowness. I placed my arms in front of me, and he shackled them in heavy chains. When he let the chains fall, my body lurched down a bit with them.

"Walk," he ordered, and I followed him into the hallway.

Carter was already out there, and he looked awful. His clothes were even dirtier than mine, and he seemed to be having a hard time standing upright. But the instant he saw me, his face lit up with a smile like fireworks, causing a gash on his lip to reopen and bleed. I gave him a tiny smile before the guards started leading us toward the stairs at the end of the hall.

Based on our trips to the safe rooms, I knew there were more

passages in the palace than anyone might suspect. Last night we were taken to our cells via a door I'd always assumed was a linen closet, and we took that same path now to the first floor.

When we reached the landing, the guard leading us turned around and barked a single word. "Stay."

Carter and I stood behind the half-opened door, waiting to be escorted to our humiliating and painful punishment.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. I looked up at him, and even with his bleeding lip and messy hair, all I saw was the boy who insisted on taking me to the hospital wing, the boy who brought me flowers.

"I'm not," I replied as forcefully as I could.

In an instant, every stolen moment we'd shared flashed through my mind. I saw all the times our eyes had met and quickly turned away; all the times I'd made a point to stand or sit somewhere in a room if I knew he was nearby; every wink he'd given me when I'd walked in for dinner; every quiet giggle I'd let out as I passed him in a hall.

We'd pieced together a relationship around all our obligations to the palace, and if I had been walking to my death today, I'd have done my best to take the past month for what it was and be satisfied. I had found my soul mate. I knew it. And there was too much love in my heart to leave room for regret.

"We'll be okay, Marlee," Carter promised. "Whatever happens after today, I'll take care of you."

"And I'll take care of you."

Carter leaned down to kiss me, but the guards stopped him. "Enough!" one snapped at us.

Finally the door was opened all the way, and Carter was pulled forward ahead of me. Morning sun flooded in through the palace doors, and I had to turn my eyes to the ground to bear it. But as disorienting as the brightness was, the deafening shouts from the throngs of people waiting to see the spectacle were worse. As we emerged outside, I squinted up and noticed an area of special seating set aside. I was heartbroken to spot America and May in the very front row. After a pull from the guard nearly made me fall, I looked up again, searching for my parents, praying they were already gone.

My prayers went unanswered.

I knew Maxon was too kind to do this. If he had tried to get me out of this punishment altogether, then it couldn't have been his idea to make my mom and dad watch it firsthand. I didn't want anger to take up any room in my heart, but I knew who was responsible for this, and an ember of hatred burned inside me for the king.

Suddenly Maxon's coat was ripped from my shoulders, and I was pushed to my knees in front of a wooden block. The metal shackles

were removed, and my wrists were bound with leather straps.

"This is a crime punishable by death!" someone called. "But in his mercy, Prince Maxon is going to spare these two traitors their lives. Long live Prince Maxon!"

The straps on my wrists made everything very real. Fear surged through me, and I started crying. I looked at my smooth hands, wanting to remember them as they were now, wishing I could use them to wipe away my tears. Then I turned to Carter.

Even though the thing he was strapped to was in the way, he craned his neck so he could see me. I focused on him. I wasn't alone. We had each other. The pain would last temporarily, but on the other side of it I had Carter forever. My love, forever.

Even though I could feel myself shaking with fear, I was also strangely proud. It wasn't as if I would ever brag about being caned for falling in love, but I realized there were some people who would never know how special it was to have someone. I did. I had a soul mate. And I would do anything for him.

"I love you, Marlee. We're going to be okay," Carter vowed over the din of the crowd. "It'll be okay, I promise."

My throat was dry. I couldn't answer him. I nodded, so he would know I had heard, but I was disappointed in myself for not being able to tell him that I loved him, too.

"Marlee Tames and Carter Woodwork!" I turned at the sound of our names. "You are both hereby stripped of your castes. You are the lowest of the low. You are Eights!"

The people cheered, enjoying our humiliation.

"And to inflict upon you the shame and pain you have brought upon His Majesty, you will be publicly caned fifteen strikes. May your scars remind you of your many sins!"

He stepped aside, raising his arms to the audience for one last cheer. I watched as the masked men who had bound Carter and me reached into a tall bucket and pulled out long, soaking rods. The time for speeches had ended, and the show was about to start.

Of all the things I could have thought of, at that very moment I remembered an English lesson on idioms from years ago. We had discussed the phrase "rule of thumb," and I remembered our tutor mentioning that the term might have originated with a husband being allowed to beat his wife, but only with a stick no bigger around than his thumb.

The rod we were faced with wouldn't pass that test.

As they whipped the canes around, warming up, I averted my eyes. Carter took a few deep breaths, then swallowed once and brought his focus back to me. Again my heart swelled with love. The caning would be much worse for him—he might not even be able to walk

after it was over—but he was worried about me.

"One!"

I wasn't at all braced for the hit, and I cried out from the sting. It actually ebbed for a moment, and I thought this might not be so awful. Then, without warning, my skin began burning. The burning grew and grew until—

"Two!"

They timed the strikes perfectly. Just as the pain hit its peak, a new wave added to it. I called out pathetically, watching my hands shake from the agony.

"We'll be okay!" Carter insisted, bearing his own torture while trying to ease mine.

"Three!"

After that hit I made the mistake of balling up my hands, thinking it would somehow ease the pain. Instead, the pressure made it a dozen times worse, and I let out some strange, guttural sound.

"Four!"

Was that blood?

"Five!"

It was definitely blood.

"It'll be over soon," Carter promised. He sounded so weak. I wished he'd save his strength.

"Six!"

I couldn't do it. I couldn't make it anymore. There was no way to tolerate more pain than this. Any more pain would certainly mean death.

"Love . . . you."

I waited for the next strike to come, but there seemed to be a hiccup in the proceedings.

I heard someone screaming my name—it almost sounded as if they were coming to my rescue. I tried to look around, and that was a mistake.

"Seven!"

I outright screamed. While waiting for the strikes was nearly unbearable, being completely blindsided by them was much worse. My hands were torn into pulpy, swollen messes; and as the cane came down again, my body gave up, and thankfully the world turned black and I could return to my dreams of the past. . . .

The halls felt so empty. With only six of us left, the palace was starting to feel too big. But small at the same time. How did Queen Amberly live like this? This life must get so isolating. Sometimes I had the urge to scream just to hear something.

A light trill of laughter caught me, and I turned to see America and

Maxon in the garden. He had his arms tucked behind him, and she was walking backward, hands moving in the air as if she was telling him a story. She made a point, exaggerating it with her gestures, and Maxon bent forward, laughing and squinting his eyes. It seemed as if he was holding his hands behind him because, if he didn't hold himself back, he'd scoop her up right then and there. He seemed to know a move like that would be too much too fast, and she might panic. I admired his patience and was happy to see he was on the path to making the best possible choice for himself.

Maybe it shouldn't have made me so happy to lose, but I couldn't help it. They were too good together. He was control to her chaos; she was levity to his seriousness.

I kept watching, thinking that it wasn't so long ago that she and I were in that same spot, and I had nearly made a confession of my own. But I had held my tongue. Confused as I was, I knew I shouldn't say anything.

"Lovely day."

I jumped a little at the words, but as my brain registered his voice, a dozen other reactions followed. I blushed, my heart started racing, and I felt absolutely foolish at how pleased I was to see him.

One side of his lips quirked up in a half smile, and I melted.

"It is," I said. "How are you?"

"All right," he answered. But his smile fell a little and his eyebrows furrowed.

"What's wrong?" I asked quietly.

He swallowed as he thought. Then, checking behind us to make sure we were alone, he leaned in close. "Is there a time today when your maids will all be gone?" he whispered. "When I could maybe come talk to you?"

It was embarrassingly loud, the rhythm my heart was making as I thought of being alone with him.

"Yes. They leave for lunch together around one."

"I'll see you a little after one then." His smile still seemed sad as he walked away. Perhaps I should have been more concerned, more worried about whatever he was going through. But all I could think of was how happy I was that I would see him again so soon.

I gazed out the window, watching America with Maxon. They were walking side by side now, and she held a flower loosely in her hand, swinging it back and forth. Maxon tentatively released one of his arms and went to put it around her, then, pausing, brought it back.

I sighed. Sooner or later they'd figure it out. And I didn't know whether to wish for it or not. I wasn't ready to leave the palace. Not just yet.

I barely touched my lunch. I was too nervous. And while I didn't go to the same extremes as I had for Maxon a few weeks ago, I caught myself glancing in every reflective surface I passed, checking to make sure I still looked put together.

I didn't. This Marlee's eyes were wider, and her skin glowed brighter. She even stood differently. She was different. I *was different.*

I thought my maids leaving would help me relax, but it only made me more aware of the time. What did he need to say? Why did he need to say it to me? Was it about *me?*

I left my door open as I waited, which was silly, because I was sure he had watched me pace for a bit before clearing his throat.

"Officer Woodwork," I said, a little too brightly, turning into a bird again.

"Hello, Miss Marlee. Is now an okay time?" He walked in, his steps unsure.

"Yes. My maids just left and will be gone for about an hour. Please sit," I offered, gesturing to my table.

"I don't think so, miss. I feel like I need to say this quickly and go."

"Oh." I'd built up a fragile kind of hope around this meeting, as stupid as it was, and now . . . Well, now I didn't know what to expect.

I saw how uneasy he was, and I hated it. I couldn't stand the feeling that I somehow contributed to it.

"Officer Woodwork," I started quietly. "You can tell me anything you want to. You don't need to be so anxious."

He let out a breath. "See, it's things like that."

"I'm sorry?"

Shaking his head, he began again. "That's not fair. I'm not blaming you for anything. In fact, I wanted to come here to take some ownership of it, and to ask your forgiveness."

I frowned. "I still don't understand."

He bit his lip, watching me. "I think I owe you an apology. Ever since I met you, I've been going out of my way, hoping to catch you in a hall or get to say hello to you."

I tried to hide my smile. I'd been doing the same thing.

"The times we get to speak are some of the best times I've had in the palace. Listening to you laugh or hearing about your day or going over a subject with you that I'm not sure either of us understands, well, I've loved it all."

His lip hitched up into that sideways smile, and I chuckled, thinking of those conversations. They were always too short or too quiet. I didn't enjoy talking to anyone as much as to him.

"I love them, too," I admitted.

His smile faltered. "I think that's why they need to stop."

Did someone actually punch me in the stomach, or was that just my imagination?

"I think I'm crossing a line. I only ever meant to be friendly with you, but the more I see you, the more I feel like I have to hide it. And if I'm hiding it, then I must be too close to you."

I blinked back tears. From the very first day, I'd done the same thing, telling myself it was nothing while knowing it wasn't.

"You're his," he said, talking to the floor. "I know that you're the people's favorite. Of course you are. The royal family will take that into account for sure before the prince makes his final choice. If I keep whispering things to you in hallways, am I committing treason? I must be."

He shook his head again, trying to figure out his feelings.

"You're right," I whispered. "I came here for him, and I promised to be faithful; and if anything between you and me could be considered more than platonic, then it should stop."

We stood there, staring at the floor. I was having a hard time catching my breath. Clearly, I'd been hoping this conversation would take the opposite direction—but I hadn't even been aware of that until it didn't.

"This shouldn't hurt this much," I mumbled.

"No, it shouldn't," he agreed.

I ducked my head, rubbing the heel of my hand into an aching spot on my chest. My eyes flitted up, and I saw that Carter was doing the exact same thing.

I knew at that moment. I knew he felt whatever I felt. It may not have been what was supposed to happen, but how could we deny it now? What if Maxon did choose me? Did I have to say yes? What if I was stuck here married to one man while watching the person I truly wanted walking around my home every day?

No.

I would not do this to myself.

Abandoning every ladylike notion in my head, I darted to the door, shutting it. I ran back to Carter, placed my hand behind his neck, and kissed him.

There was a split second of hesitation before his arms went around me, then he held me to him as if I was something he needed to live.

When we pulled apart, he shook his head, scolding himself. "Lost that war. No hope for retreat now." But while his words were filled with remorse, the little smirk on his face gave away that he was as happy as I was.

"I can't be without you, Carter," I said, using the name he'd only recently shared with me for the first time.

"This is dangerous. You understand that, right? This could kill us both."

I closed my eyes and nodded, the tears falling on my cheeks. With his love or without it, either way I was inviting death.

I woke up to the sound of moans. For a second I couldn't think of where I was. Then it came rushing back to me. The Halloween party. The caning. Carter . . .

The room was poorly lit, and, looking around, I saw it was only big enough for the cots that he and I were sprawled out on. I tried to push myself up and immediately shrieked. I wondered how long my hands would be useless.

"Marlee?"

I turned to Carter, propping myself on my elbows. "I'm here. I'm okay. I tried to use my hands."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry." He sounded like he had rocks in his throat.

"How are you?"

"Alive," he joked. He was lying on his stomach, but I could see the smile on his face. "It hurts to move at all."

"Can I help you?" I slowly got to my feet and peered over at him. The bottom half of his body was covered in a sheet, and I had no idea what if anything I could do to ease his pain. I saw a table in the corner with jars and bandages on it, as well as a piece of paper, and hobbled over to it.

He hadn't signed it, but I knew Maxon's handwriting.

> *When you wake up, change your bandages. Use the salve in the jar. Apply it with the cotton swabs to avoid infection and try not to wrap the gauze too tight. The pills will help as well. Then rest. Do not attempt to leave this room.*

"Carter, I have some medicine for us." I gingerly unscrewed the cap using only the tips of my fingers. The smell of the slightly thick substance was reminiscent of aloe.

"What?" He turned his face toward me.

"There are bandages and instructions."

I looked at my wrapped hands and tried to think of how I was going to manage this.

"I'll help you," Carter offered, reading my mind.

I smiled. "This is going to be hard."

"Absolutely," he murmured. "This isn't exactly how I imagined you would be seeing me naked for the first time."

I couldn't fight the laugh that came out. And I fell in love all over again. In less than a day I'd been beaten and made an Eight, and was waiting to be exiled to who knew where. Still, I was laughing.

What princess could have more?

It was impossible to judge how much time had passed, but we didn't try to call out or knock on the door.

"Have you thought about where they'll send us?" Carter asked. I was on the floor beside him, running the tips of my fingers across his short hair.

“If I got a choice, I’d pick someplace hot over someplace cold.”

“I have a feeling it will be one of the extremes, too.”

I sighed. “I’m scared not to have a home.”

“Don’t be. I might be a little worthless at the moment, but I can take care of us. I even know how to build an igloo if we end up somewhere cold.”

I smiled. “Do you really?”

He nodded. “I’ll build you the prettiest igloo, Marlee. Everyone will be so jealous.”

I kissed his head over and over. “You’re not worthless, by the way. It’s not like—”

The door made a ratcheting sound, then opened. Three people walked in wearing brown hooded cloaks, and I felt a wave of fear.

Then the first person pulled off his hood, revealing himself. I gasped and leaped to my feet to embrace Maxon, forgetting again about my hands and gasping at the pain.

“It will be all right,” Maxon promised as I drew back my hands. “The salve takes a few days to get everything back to normal, but, Carter, even you should be walking on your own soon. You’ll heal much faster than most.”

Maxon turned to the two other hooded figures. “This is Juan Diego and Abril. Until today they have worked in the palace. Now you will be trading places with them. Marlee, if you and Abril will go into the corner, the gentlemen and I will avert our eyes while you trade clothes. Here,” he said, handing me a cloak similar to hers. “This will help with some privacy.”

I looked at Abril’s timid face. “Of course.”

We moved to one corner, and she pulled off her skirt, then helped me put it on. I slipped off my dress and handed it to her.

“Carter, we’re going to have to put pants back on you. We’ll help you stand.”

I kept my face turned, trying not to get anxious over the sounds Carter made.

“Thank you,” I whispered to Abril.

“It was the prince’s idea,” she replied quietly. “He must have spent the entire day going through records and searching for anyone who came from Panama when he found out where you were going. We sold ourselves into service at the palace to provide for our family. Today we’re going home to them.”

“Panama. We were curious where we’d end up.”

“It was cruel of the king to send you there on top of everything else,” she murmured.

“What do you mean?”

Abril looked over her shoulder at the prince, making sure he

wasn't listening. "I grew up as a Six there, and it wasn't pretty. Eights? They end up being killed for sport sometimes."

I gaped at her in disbelief. "What?"

"Every few months we'd find someone who'd been begging on a corner for ages dead in the middle of the road. No one knows who does it. Other Eights maybe? The rich Twos and Threes? Rebels? But it happens. There's a very good chance you would have died."

"Now just hold on to my arm," Maxon coaxed, and I turned to see Carter hunched into the prince, a hood already covering his head.

"All right. Abril, Juan Diego, the guards should be coming to this room. Use the bandages and walk like you're hurt. I think they plan to put you on a bus and ship you off. Just keep your heads down. No one's going to look at you too closely. You're supposed to be Eights. No one will care."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Juan Diego said. "I never thought we'd see our mother again."

"Thank *you*," Maxon replied. "Your willingness to leave the palace is saving their lives. I won't forget what you've done for them."

I looked at Abril one last time.

"Okay." Maxon pulled on his hood. "Let's go."

With Carter limping and leaning into him, Maxon led us into the hall.

"Won't people be suspicious?" I whispered.

"No," Maxon answered, checking around each corner all the same. "Lower-level staff, like kitchen workers or general cleaners, aren't supposed to show their faces upstairs. If they absolutely must come up, they're covered like this. Anyone who sees us will think we're done with a task and heading back to our rooms."

Maxon took us down a long stairwell that opened to a narrow hallway lined with doors. "In here."

We followed him into a small room. There was a bed shoved into one corner and a tiny stand next to it. It looked like a carafe of milk and some bread was waiting, and my stomach roared just from seeing food. A thin rug had been placed neatly in the middle of the floor, and a few shelves lined the door-side wall.

"I know it's not much, but you'll be safe here. I'm sorry I can't do better."

Carter shook his head. "How can you be apologizing to us? Our lives were supposed to end hours ago; but we're alive, together, and we have a home." He and Maxon shared a look. "I know that what I did was technically treason, but it had nothing to do with a lack of respect for you."

"I know."

"Good. So when I say that no one in this kingdom will ever be as

loyal to you as me, I hope you believe it." Carter winced as he finished speaking and fell into the prince.

"Let's get you to the bed." I moved under his other shoulder, and Maxon and I laid him on his stomach. He took up most of the bed, and I knew I'd need to sleep on the rug tonight.

"A nurse will come check on you in the morning," Maxon explained. "You can have a few days of rest, and you should stay in here as much as you can during that time. In three or four days, I'll have you put on the official work orders, and someone from the kitchen will give you something to do. I don't know what your exact jobs will be, but just do your best at whatever you're asked.

"I'll check on you as often as I can. For now, no one will know you're here. Not the guards, not the Elite, not even your families. You will interact with a small group of people on the palace staff, and the chances of them recognizing you are slim. Still, from now on your names are Mallory and Carson. This is the only way I can protect you."

I looked up at him, thinking that if I could hand choose a husband for my best friend, it'd be him.

"You've done so much for us. Thank you."

"I wish it was more. I am going to try to get some of your personal items if I can. Beyond that, is there anything I can give you? If it's within reason, I promise I'll try."

"One thing," Carter said tiredly. "When you get a chance, can you find us a preacher?"

It took a second for me to understand the intention behind that request, and the moment I did, my eyes filled with happy tears.

"Sorry," he added. "I know that's not the most romantic proposal."

"Yes, all the same," I murmured.

I watched his eyes get wet, and I temporarily forgot Maxon was even in the room until he spoke up.

"It'd be my pleasure. I'm not sure how long that will take, but I'll make it happen." He pulled the medicines from upstairs out of his pocket, setting them beside the food. "Use the salve again tonight, and rest as much as you can. The nurse will see to anything else tomorrow."

I nodded. "I'll take care of us."

Maxon backed out of the room, smiling as he went.

"Do you want some food, fiancé?" I asked.

Carter grinned. "Oh, thank you, fiancée, but I'm actually kind of tired."

"All right, fiancé. Why don't you sleep for a bit?"

"I'd sleep better if my fiancée was with me."

And then, forgetting I'd been hungry at all, I wiggled my way onto

the tiny bed, half hanging off the edge and half squashed beneath Carter. It was shocking how easily I found sleep.

PART II

I FLEXED MY HANDS OVER and over. They had finally healed, but sometimes when I had a long day, my palms swelled and throbbed. Even my little ring was pulled too tight tonight. I could see where it was fraying on one side and made a mental note to ask Carter for a new one tomorrow. I'd lost count of how many twine bands we'd gone through, but it meant a lot to me to have that symbol on my hand.

Picking up the scraper again, I scooped the loose flour off the table and into the trash. A few other members of the kitchen staff were scrubbing floors or putting away ingredients. Everything for breakfast was prepped, and soon we could sleep.

I inhaled sharply as a set of hands wrapped around my waist. "Hello, wife," Carter said, kissing my cheek. "Are you still working?" He smelled like his job: cut grass and sunshine. I had been sure he would be stuck in the stables—somewhere he would be hidden away from the eyes of the king—just as I'd been buried in the kitchen. Instead, he was walking around with dozens of other groundskeepers, hiding in plain sight. He came in at night with the outdoors hanging on him, and for a moment, it was like I'd been outside, too.

I sighed. "I'm almost done. After I tidy up here I'll come to bed."

He nuzzled his nose into my neck. "Don't overdo it. I could rub your hands if you want."

"That'd be perfect," I crooned. I still loved my end-of-the-day hand massages—maybe more so now that they were given to me by Carter—but if my day ended well after bedtime, it was a luxury I typically went without.

Sometimes my thoughts got stuck on memories of my days as a lady. How nice it had been to be adored; how proud my family was; how beautiful I felt. It was difficult to go from being constantly served to being the one constantly serving; still, I knew things could be much, much worse.

I tried to keep the smile on my face, but he saw through it.

"What's wrong, Marlee? You've seemed down lately," he whispered, still holding me.

"I really miss my parents, especially now that Christmas is so close. I keep wondering how they're doing. If I feel this sad without them, how are they managing without me?" I pressed my lips together, as if I could mash the worry out of them. "And I know it's probably silly to care about this, but we won't be able to exchange gifts. What could I

give you? A loaf of bread?"

"I'd love a loaf of bread!"

I giggled at his enthusiasm. "But I wouldn't even be able to use my own flour to make you one. It'd be stealing."

He kissed my cheek. "True. Besides, the last time I stole something, it was pretty big, and I got more than I deserved, and I'm already happy with what I have."

"You didn't steal me. I'm not a teapot."

"Hmm," he said. "Maybe you stole me. Because I distinctly remember belonging to myself once, but now I'm all yours."

I smiled. "I love you."

"I love you, too. Don't worry. I know it's a difficult season, but this isn't forever. And we have a lot to be grateful for this year."

"We do. I'm sorry I'm so down today. I just feel—"

"Mallory!" I turned at the sound of my new name. "Where's Mallory?" a guard asked, coming into the kitchen. He was with a girl I'd never seen before.

I swallowed before answering. "Here."

"Come, please."

His voice was urgent, but the fact that he said please made me less frightened than I would have been otherwise. Each day I fretted more and more that someone would tell the king Carter and I were living secretly in his home. I knew that if that ever happened, the caning would seem like a prize instead of a punishment.

I kissed Carter's cheek. "I'll be right back."

As I passed the girl she gripped my hand. "Thank you. I'll just wait here for you."

My forehead scrunched in confusion. "Okay."

"We're all counting on absolute secrecy," the guard said as he led me down the hall.

"Of course," I answered, though I still didn't understand.

We turned down the officers' wing, and I became even more confused. Someone of my rank shouldn't be allowed in this part of the palace. The doors were all closed except for one, where another officer was standing just outside. His face was calm, but his eyes were worried.

"Just do your best," someone said from inside the room. I knew that voice.

I pulled myself around the threshold and took in the scene. America was lying on a bed, blood streaming out of her arm while her head maid, Anne, inspected the wound and the prince and these two guards watched on.

Anne, not breaking her gaze, barked orders back to the guards. "Someone get some boiling water. We should have antiseptic in the

kit, but I want water, too."

"I'll get it," I offered.

America's face perked up, and she met my gaze. "Marlee." She started crying, and I could see she was losing her battle with the pain.

"I'll be right back, America. Hold tight!" I dashed to the kitchen, grabbing towels out of the cupboard. There was water already boiling in a pot, thank goodness, so I poured some in a pitcher. "Cimmy, you're gonna want to top off this pot," I called in a rush, moving too quickly for her to protest.

Then I made my way to the spirits. The best liquor was kept close to the king, but sometimes we used brandy in recipes. I'd mastered a brandy pork chop, a chicken with brandy sauce, and a brandy–whipped cream for desserts. I grabbed a bottle, hoping it would help.

I knew a thing or two about pain.

I came back to Anne lacing thread through a needle and America trying to control her breathing. I put the water and towels behind Anne and walked over to the bed with the bottle.

"For the pain," I explained, lifting America's head to help her drink. She attempted to swallow but coughed up more than she actually drank. "Try again."

I sat beside her, steering clear of her injured arm, and tipped the bottle again to her lips. She did a little bit better that time. After she swallowed, she gazed up at me. "I'm so glad you're here."

My heart broke to see her look so scared, even though she was safe now. I didn't know what she'd been through, but I was going to do my best to make it better. "I'll always be here for you, America. You know that." I smiled at her and brushed a lock of hair away from her forehead. "What in the world were you doing?"

I could see the debate in her eyes about answering. "It seemed like a good idea" was all she said.

I tilted my head. "America, you are full of nothing but bad ideas," I said, trying not to laugh. "Great intentions but awful ideas."

She pursed her lips as if to say she knew exactly what I was talking about.

"How soundproof are these walls?" Anne asked the guards. This must be their room.

"Pretty good," one answered. "Don't hear too much this deep in the palace."

Anne nodded. "Good. Okay, I need everyone in the hall. Miss Marlee," she continued. It had been so long since anyone besides Carter had used my real name that I wanted to cry. I didn't realize how much my name meant to me. "I'm going to need some space, but you can stay."

"I'll keep out of your way, Anne," I promised.

The boys backed into the hallway, and Anne took over. As she spoke to America and prepared to stitch her up, I couldn't help but be impressed with how calm she was. I'd always liked America's maids, especially Lucy, because she was so, so sweet. But this made me see Anne in a whole new light. It seemed unfortunate that someone who was so capable in a crisis couldn't do more than be a lady's maid.

Finally Anne began to clean out the wound, which I still couldn't identify. America screamed into the towel in her mouth, and though I hated to do it, I knew I had to pin her down to keep her still. I climbed on top of her, focusing most of my effort on keeping her one arm straight.

"Thank you," Anne mumbled, pulling out a tiny black speck with some tweezers. Was that dirt? Pavement? Thank goodness Anne was thorough. The air alone could leave America with a nasty infection, but it was clear that Anne wasn't going to let that happen.

America screamed again, and I shushed her. "It'll be over soon, America," I said, thinking of the things Maxon had told me before I was caned and the words Carter had spoken as it was happening. "Think of something happy. Think about your family."

I could see she was trying, but it clearly wasn't working. She was in too much pain. So I gave her more brandy and continued to give her sips until Anne was finished.

When it was all over, I wondered if America would even remember any of this. After Anne wrapped the wound in a bandage, she and I stood back and watched America sing a children's Christmas song while drawing imaginary pictures on the wall with her finger.

Anne and I grinned at her sloppy movements. "Does anyone know where the puppies even *are*?" America asked. "Why are they so far away?"

We covered our mouths, laughing so hard we were crying. The danger had passed, America was taken care of, and in her head there was a puppy emergency.

"Let's maybe keep this to ourselves," Anne suggested.

"Yes, I think so." I sighed. "What do you think happened to her?"

Anne tensed up. "I can't begin to even guess what they were doing, but I can tell you for sure, that was a gunshot wound."

"Gunshot?" I exclaimed.

Anne nodded. "A few inches to the left and she could have died."

I looked down at America, who was now poking her cheeks with her fingers, seemingly just so she could see how it felt.

"Thank goodness she's all right."

"Even if she wasn't my lady, I think I'd still want her to be princess. I don't know what I'd have done if we lost her." Anne spoke not simply as a servant but as a subject. I knew exactly what she

meant.

I nodded. “I’m glad she had you tonight. I’ll go get the boys to take her back to her room.” I crouched beside America. “Hey, I’m going now. But you try not to break yourself again, all right?”

She nodded sluggishly. “Yes, ma’am.”

She definitely wouldn’t remember this.

The guard who had come for me was standing at the end of the hall, keeping watch. The other guard was sitting on the floor just outside the room, fidgeting with his hands while Maxon paced.

“Well?” the prince asked.

“She’s doing better. Anne took care of everything, and America is . . . Well, she had a lot of the brandy, so she’s a little out of it.” The lyrics of her Christmas song trilled through my head and I giggled. “You can go in now.”

The guard on the floor was up in a flash, Maxon right behind him. I wanted to stop them, ask questions, but now probably wasn’t the time.

I wearily walked back to our room, crashing now that the adrenaline had faded. As I approached, I saw Carter sitting in the hall outside our door.

“Oh! You didn’t have to wait up for me,” I said quietly, hoping not to disturb anyone else.

“I put her on our bed,” he said, “so I decided I’d wait out here.”

“Put who on our bed?”

“The girl from the kitchen. The one who was with the guard.”

“Oh, right.” I sat next to him. “What did she want with me?”

“It sounds like you’re training her. Her name is Paige, and based on the story she just told me, tonight was a *really* interesting night.”

“What do you mean?”

He lowered his voice even further. “She was a prostitute. She said America found her and brought her here. So the prince and America were outside of the palace tonight. Do you have any idea why?”

I shook my head. “All I know is, I was just helping Anne stitch up America’s gunshot wound.”

Carter’s shocked expression mirrored my own. “What could they have done to put themselves in such danger?”

I yawned. “I don’t know. But I have a feeling it was an effort to do good.”

While running into prostitutes and shoot-outs didn’t sound entirely wholesome, if there was one thing I knew about Maxon, it was that he always strove to do what was right.

“Come on,” Carter said. “You can sleep next to Paige. And I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“Nope. Where you go, I go,” I replied. I needed to be beside him

tonight. So much was going through my head, and I knew he was my only safe place.

I remembered thinking America was foolish for being upset with Maxon over my caning, but it made sense now. Even though he had my utmost respect, I couldn't help feeling a little angry with him for letting her get hurt. For the first time I was able to see my caning through her eyes. I knew then just how much I loved her, and how much she must love me. If she felt half the worry I felt tonight, it was more than enough.

It'd been a week and a half, and nothing felt quite normal yet. Everywhere I went, all the conversations still revolved around the attack. I was one of the lucky few. While others were ruthlessly murdered throughout the palace, Carter and I were safely tucked away in our room. He had been outside tending to the grounds when he heard gunshots, and the instant he realized what was happening, he raced into the kitchen and grabbed me, and we ran to our room. I helped him push our bed against the door, and we lay on it, adding to the weight.

I trembled in his arms as the hours passed, terrified the rebels would find us and wondering if there was any way they would show us mercy. I kept asking Carter if we should have tried to escape from the palace grounds, but he was insistent that we were safer staying put.

"You didn't see what I saw, Marlee. I don't think we would have made it."

So we'd waited, straining to hear the sounds of enemies and relieved when friends finally came down the hall, knocking on doors. It was a strange thing to think about, but when we'd gone into that room, Clarkson was the king, and when we came out, it was Maxon.

I hadn't been alive the last time the crown was handed over to a new king. This seemed like such a natural change for the country. Maybe because I'd always been happy to follow Maxon anyway. And, of course, the work Carter and I needed to do around the palace didn't slow, so there wasn't much time to stop and think about a new ruler.

I was preparing lunch when a guard came into the kitchen and called my new name. The last time an escort came for me, America had been bleeding, so I was instantly on edge. And I wasn't sure what it meant that Carter was already standing next to the guard, covered in sweat from being outside.

"Do you know what this is about?" I whispered to Carter as the guard took us upstairs.

"No. I can't imagine we're in trouble for anything, but the formality of being escorted by a guard is . . . off-putting."

I laced my hand in his, my wedding band twisting a bit in the process and lodging the knot between our fingers.

The guard led us to the Throne Room, which was typically reserved for greeting guests or special ceremonies related to the crown. Maxon was sitting at the far end of the room, his crown affixed on his head. He looked so wise. My heart swelled to see America sitting on a smaller throne to his right, her hands folded in her lap. There was no crown for her yet—that would come on her wedding day—but she wore a comb in her hair that looked like a sunburst, and she was already so queenly.

Off to one side, a group of advisers sat at a table, reviewing stacks of papers and furiously scribbling notes.

We followed the guard down a blue carpet. He stopped right before King Maxon and bowed, then stepped aside, leaving Carter and me facing the thrones.

Carter quickly dipped his head. “Your Majesty.”

I followed with a curtsy.

“Carter and Marlee Woodwork,” he began with a smile. My heart wanted to burst from hearing my full, true married name. “In light of your service to the crown, I, your king, am taking the liberty of undoing past punishments inflicted upon you.”

Carter and I peeked at each other, unsure of what this meant.

“Of course, your physical punishment cannot be changed, but other stipulations may. Am I correct that you were both sentenced to be Eights?”

It was bizarre to hear him speak like this, but I supposed there were rules to follow. Carter spoke for both of us.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And is it also correct that you have been living in the palace, doing the work of Sixes for the past two months?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Is it also true that you, Mrs. Woodwork, served the future queen when she was physically unwell?”

I smiled at America. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Is it also true that you, Mr. Woodwork, have loved and cherished Mrs. Woodwork, a former Elite, and therefore precious Daughter of Illéa, giving her the best she can possibly have under your circumstances?”

Carter looked down. It was as if I could see him questioning whether he’d given me enough.

I piped up again. “Yes, Your Majesty!”

I watched my husband as he blinked back tears. He was the one who told me that the life we had now wasn’t forever, the one who encouraged me when the days were too long. How could he ever think

he wasn't enough?

"In accordance with your service, I, King Maxon Schreave, am relieving you of your caste assignments. You are no longer Eights. Carter and Marlee Woodwork, you are the first citizens in Illéa to be casteless."

I squinted at him. "Casteless, Your Majesty?" I chanced a look at America and saw her beaming at me, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Correct. You are now at liberty to make two choices. First, you must decide whether you would like to continue to call the palace your home. Second, you can tell me what profession you would like to have. Whatever you decide, my fiancée and I will happily provide you with lodging and assistance. But, even after that, you will still have no caste. You will simply be yourselves."

I turned to Carter, completely gobsmacked.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"We owe him everything."

"Agreed." Carter drew himself up and turned to Maxon. "Your Majesty, my wife and I would be happy to stay in your home and serve you. I can't speak for her, but I love my position as a groundskeeper. I'm happy to work outside, and I would do that for as long as I'm able. If the head position ever opens, I'd like to be considered for it, but I am otherwise content."

Maxon nodded. "Very well. And Mrs. Woodwork?"

I looked at America. "If the future queen would have me, I'd love to be one of her ladies-in-waiting."

America bounced in her seat a little and pulled her hands up to her heart.

Maxon looked at her as if she was the most adorable thing on the planet. "You might be able to tell that's what she was hoping for." He cleared his throat and sat up straighter, calling out to the men at the table. "Let it be recorded that Carter and Marlee Woodwork have been forgiven of their past crimes and now live under the protection of the palace. Let it further say that they have no caste and are above any such segregation."

"So recorded!" one man shouted back.

As soon as he had finished speaking, Maxon stood and took off his crown, while America positively leaped out of her seat and ran down to throw her arms around me. "I hoped you would stay!" she sang. "I can't do this without you!"

"Are you kidding? How lucky am I to serve the queen?"

Maxon joined us and gave Carter a firm handshake. "Are you sure about the groundskeeping? You could go back to guarding or even be an adviser if you like."

"I'm sure. I've never had a head for that kind of thing. I was

always good with my hands, and that kind of work makes me happy."

"All right," Maxon said. "If you ever change your mind, let me know."

Carter nodded, wrapping an arm around me.

"Oh!" America galloped back to her throne. "I almost forgot!" Picking up a small box, she returned to us, beaming.

"What's that?" I asked.

She smiled at Maxon. "I'd promised you I'd be at your wedding, and I wasn't. And even though it's a little late, I thought I could make up for it with a little present."

America held out the box to us, and I bit my lip in anticipation. All the things I thought I'd have at my wedding—a beautiful dress, a fantastic party, a room full of flowers—had been missing. The only thing I did have on that day was an absolutely perfect groom, and I was happy enough about that to let everything else pass.

Still, it was nice to receive a gift. It made things feel real.

I cracked open the box and resting inside were two simple, beautiful gold bands.

I covered my mouth. "America!"

"We did our best at guessing your sizes," Maxon said. "And if you'd prefer a different metal, we'd be happy to exchange them."

"I think your strings are sweet," America said. "I hope you put the ones you're wearing now away somewhere and keep them forever. But we thought you deserved something a bit more permanent."

I stared at them, not able to believe they were real. It was funny. They were such small things, but they were absolutely priceless. I was close to tears with joy.

Carter took the rings out of my hand and handed them to Maxon, removing the smaller one from the box.

"Let's see how it looks." He slowly rolled my string down my finger, holding on to it as he slid the gold one on in its place.

"A little loose," I said, fiddling with it. "But it's perfect."

Excited, I reached for Carter's ring, and he tugged off his old one, keeping it with mine. His fit wonderfully, and I sat my hand on top of his, fanning out my fingers.

"This is too much!" I said. "It's too many good things in one day."

America came up behind me and wrapped her arms around me. "I have a feeling lots of good things are coming."

I hugged her as Carter went to shake Maxon's hand again. "I'm so glad to have you back," I whispered.

"Me, too."

"And you'll need someone to stop you from going overboard," I teased.

"Are you kidding? I need an army of people to stop me from going

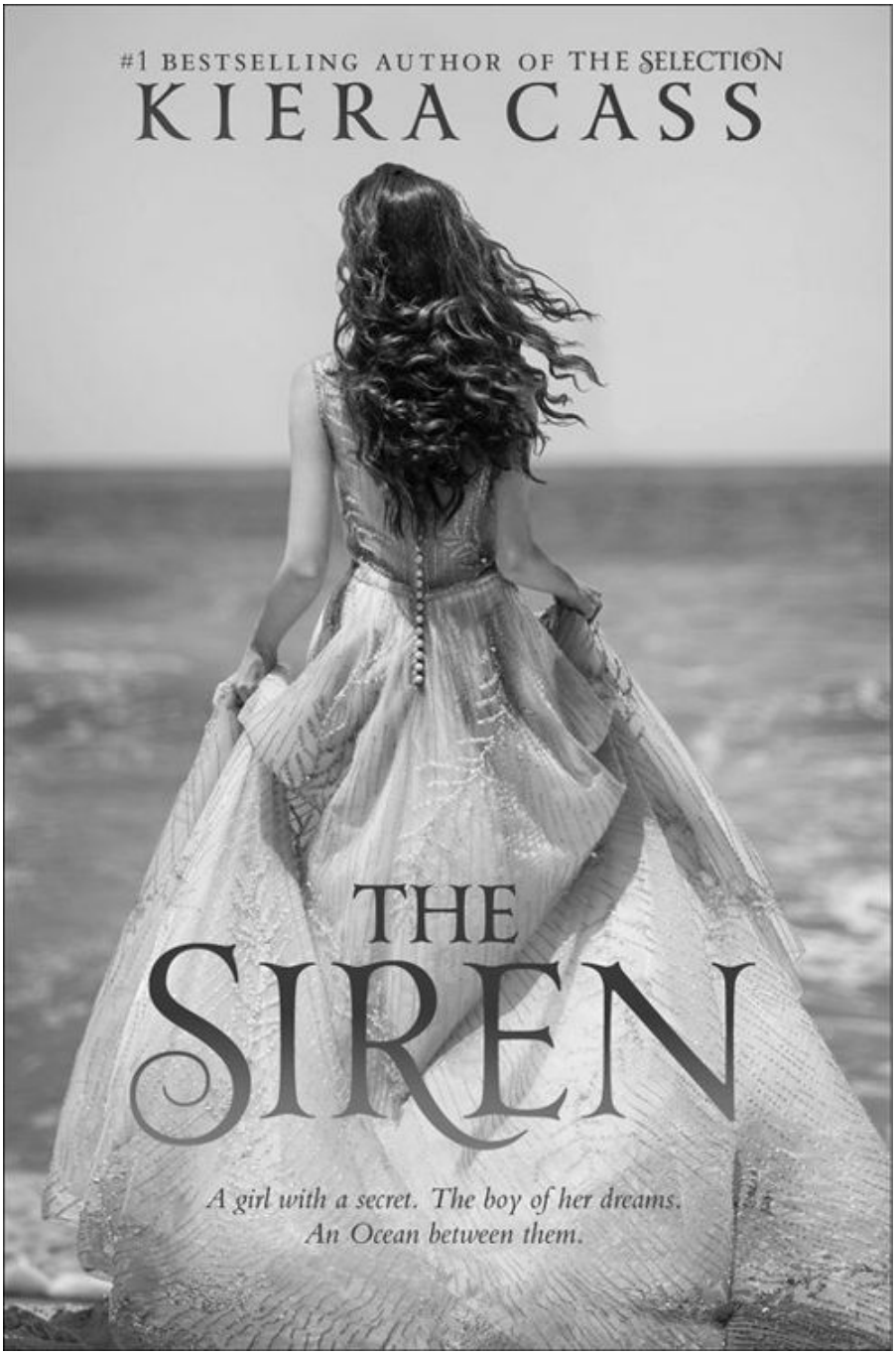
overboard."

I giggled. "I'll never be able to thank you enough. You know that, right? I'll always be here for you."

"Then that will be thanks enough."

EXCERPT FROM *THE SIREN*

She will risk everything for love.



Read on for a sneak peek at this
sweeping fantasy romance from Kiera Cass!

ONE

IT'S FUNNY WHAT YOU HOLD on to, the things you remember when everything ends. I can still picture the paneling on the walls of our stateroom and recall precisely how plush the carpet was. I remember the saltwater smell, permeating the air and sticking to my skin, and the sound of my brothers' laughter in the other room, like the storm was an exciting adventure instead of a nightmare.

More than any sense of fear or worry, there was an air of irritation hanging in the room. The storm was throwing off our evening's plans; there would be no dancing on the upper deck tonight. These were the woes that plagued my life, so insignificant they're almost shameful to own up to. But that was my once upon a time, back when my reality felt like a story for how good it was.

"If this rocking doesn't stop soon, I won't have time to fix my hair before dinner," Mama complained. I peeked at her from where I was lying on the floor, trying desperately not to throw up. Mama looked as glamorous as a movie star, and her finger waves seemed perfect to me. But she was never satisfied. "You ought to get up," she continued, glancing down at me. "What if the help comes in?"

I hobbled over to one of the chaise lounges, doing—as always—what I was told, though I didn't think this position was necessarily any more ladylike. Our journey up until that final day was utterly ordinary, just a family trip from point A to point B. I can't remember now where we were heading. What I do recall is that we were, as per usual, traveling in style. We were one of the few lucky families who had survived the Crash with our wealth intact—and Mama liked to make sure people knew it. So we were situated in a beautiful suite with decent-sized windows and personal stewards at our beck and call. I was entertaining the idea of ringing for one and asking for a bucket.

It was then, in that bleary haze of sickness, that I heard something. It sounded like a far-off lullaby that made me curious and, somehow, thirsty. I lifted my head and saw Mama's head turn as well, searching for the sound. The music was intoxicatingly beautiful, like a hymn to the devout.

Papa leaned into the room. "Is that the band?" he asked. His tone was calm, but the desperation in his eyes was haunting.

"Maybe. It sounds like it's coming from outside, doesn't it?" Mama was suddenly breathless and eager. "Let's go see." She hopped up and

grabbed her sweater. I was shocked. She hated being in the rain.

"But Mama, your makeup. You just said—"

"Oh, that," she said, brushing me off and shrugging her arms into an ivory cardigan. "We'll only be gone a moment. I'll have time to fix it when we get back."

"I think I'll stay." I was just as drawn to the music as the rest of them, but the clammy feeling on my face reminded me how close I was to being sick. I curled up a little tighter, resisting the overwhelming urge to stand up and follow.

Mama turned back and met my eyes. "I'd feel better with you by my side," she said with a smile.

Those were my mother's last words to me.

Even as I opened my mouth to protest, I found myself standing up and crossing the cabin to follow her. It wasn't just about obeying anymore. I had to get up on deck. I had to be closer to the song. If I had stayed in our room, I probably would have been trapped and gone down with the ship. Then I could have joined my family. In heaven or hell, or in nowhere, if it was all a lie. But no.

We went up the stairs, joined along the way by scores of other passengers. It was then I knew something was wrong. Some were rushing, fighting their way through the masses while others looked like they were sleepwalking.

I stepped out into the thrashing rain, pausing just beyond the threshold to take in the scene. I pressed my hands over my ears to shut out the crashing thunder and hypnotic music, trying to get my bearings. Two men shot past me and jumped overboard without even pausing. But the storm wasn't so bad we needed to abandon ship, was it?

I looked to my youngest brother and saw him lapping up the rain, like a wildcat clawing at raw meat. When someone near him tried to do the same, they scrapped with each other, fighting over the drops. I backed away, turning to search for my middle brother. I never found him. He was lost in the crowd surging toward the railings, gone before I could make sense of what I was witnessing.

Then I saw my parents, hand in hand, their backs against the railing, casually tipping themselves overboard. They smiled. I screamed.

What was happening? Had the world gone mad?

A note caught my ear and I dropped my hands. The song was suddenly the only thing I cared about. My worries faded away. It did seem like it would be better to be in the water, embraced by the waves instead of pelted by rain. It sounded delicious. I needed to drink it. I needed to fill my stomach, my heart, my lungs with it.

With that sole desire pulsing through me, I walked toward the rail.

It would be a pleasure to drink myself full until every last piece of me was sated. I was barely aware of hoisting myself over the side, barely aware of anything, until the hard smack of water on my face brought me back to my senses.

I was going to die.

No! I thought as I fought to get back to the surface. *I'm not ready! I want to live!* Nineteen years was not enough. There were still so many foods to taste and places to visit. A husband, I hoped, and a family. All of it, everything, gone in an instant.

Really?

I didn't have time to doubt the reality of the voice I was hearing. *Yes!*

What would you give to stay alive?

Anything!

In an instant, I was dragged out of the fray. It was as if an arm was looped around my waist, pulling with precision as I shot past body after body until I was free of them. I soon found myself lying on a hard surface and staring up at three inhumanly lovely girls.

For a moment, all the horror and confusion disappeared. There was no storm, no family, no fear. All that ever had been or ever would be were these beautiful, perfect faces. I squinted, studying them.

"Are you angels?" I asked. "Am I dead?"

The closest girl, who had eyes greener than anything I'd seen before and brilliant red hair billowing around her face, bent down. "No. You're very much alive," she promised.

I gaped at her. If I was still alive, wouldn't I be feeling the scratch of salt down my throat? Wouldn't my eyes be burning from the water? Wouldn't I still be feeling the sting on my face from where I fell? Yet I felt perfect, complete.

In the distance, I could hear screams. I lifted my head, and just over the waves I spotted the tail of our ship as it bobbed surreally out of the water.

I took several ragged breaths, too confused to grasp how I was still breathing, all the while listening to others drown around me.

"What do you remember?" she asked.

I shook my head. "The carpet." I searched my memories, already feeling them becoming distant and blurry. "And my mother's hair," I said, my voice cracking. "Then I was in the water."

"Did you ask to live?"

"I did," I sputtered, wondering if she could read my mind or if everyone else had thought it, too. "Who are you?"

"I'm Marilyn," she replied sweetly. "This is Aisling." She pointed to a blond girl who gave me a small, warm smile. "And that is Nombeko." Nombeko was as dark as the night sky and appeared to

have nearly no hair at all.

"We're singers. Sirens. Servants to the Ocean," Marilyn explained. "We help Her. We . . . feed Her."

I squinted. "What would the ocean eat?"

Marilyn glanced in the direction of the sinking ship, and I followed her gaze. Almost all the voices were quiet now.

Oh.

"It is our duty, and soon it could be yours as well. If you give your time to Her, She will give you life. From this day forward, for the next hundred years, you won't get sick or hurt, and you won't grow a day older. When your time is up, you'll get your voice and your freedom back. You'll get to live."

"I—I'm sorry," I stammered. "I don't understand."

The others smiled, but their eyes looked sad. "It would be impossible to understand now," Marilyn said. She ran her hand over my hair, already treating me as if I was one of her own. "I assure you, none of us did. But you will."

Carefully, I got to my feet, shocked to see that I was standing on water. There were still a few people afloat in the distance, flapping at the current like they might be able to save themselves.

"My mother is there," I pleaded. Nombeko sighed, her eyes wistful.

Marilyn wrapped her arm around me, looking toward the wreckage. She whispered in my ear. "You have two choices: you may remain with us or you may join your mother. *Join* her. Not save her."

I stayed silent. Could there be truth to her words? Could I choose to die? If this was real, could I do what she was suggesting?

"You said you'd give anything to live," she reminded me. "Please mean it."

I saw the hope in her eyes. She didn't want me to go. Perhaps she'd seen enough death for one day.

I nodded. I'd stay.

She pulled me close and breathed into my ear. "Welcome to the sisterhood of sirens."

I was whipped underwater, something cold forced into my veins. And, though it frightened me, it hardly hurt at all.

EIGHTY YEARS LATER



TWO

"WHY?" SHE ASKED, HER FACE bloated from drowning.

I held up my hands, warning her not to come any closer. But it was clear she wasn't afraid of me. She was looking for revenge. And she would get it any way she could.

"Why?" she demanded again. Seaweed was wrapped around her leg and made a flat, wet sound as it dragged across the floor behind her.

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop myself. "I had to."

She didn't wince at my voice, just kept advancing. This was it. I would finally have to pay for what I had done.

"I had three children."

I backed away, looking for an escape. "I didn't know! I swear, I didn't know anything!"

Finally, she stopped, just inches from me. I waited for her to beat me or strangle me, to find a way to avenge the life taken from her far too soon. But she merely stood there, her head cocked, as she took me in, eyes bulging and skin tinted blue.

Then she lunged.

I awoke with a gasp, swinging my arm at the empty air in front of me before I understood.

A dream. It was only a dream. I placed a hand on my chest, hoping to slow my heart. Instead of finding skin, I pressed my fingers into the back of my scrapbook. I pulled it off, looking at the carefully constructed pages filled with clipped news articles. Served me right for working on it before sleeping.

I had just finished my page on Kerry Straus before falling asleep. She was one of the last people I had needed to find from our most recent sinking. Two more to go, then I'd have information on every one of those lost souls. The *Arcatia* might be my first complete ship. Looking down at Kerry's page, I took in the bright eyes from the photo on her memorial website, a shabby thing no doubt created by her widower husband between trying to serve up something more creative than spaghetti for his three motherless children and the endless routine of his day job.

"At least you had someone," I told her photo. "At least there was someone to cry for you when you were gone." I wished I could explain

how a full life cut short was better than an empty life that dragged on. I closed the book and set it in my trunk with the others, one for each shipwreck. There were only a handful of people who could possibly understand how I felt, and I wasn't always sure that they did.

With a heavy sigh, I made my way to the living room, where Elizabeth's and Miaka's voices were louder than I was comfortable with.

"Kahlen!" Elizabeth greeted. I tried to be inconspicuous as I checked to make sure all the windows were closed. They knew how important it was that no one could hear us, but they were never as cautious as I would have wanted. "Miaka's just come up with another idea for her future."

I shifted my focus to Miaka. Tiny and dark in every way except for her spirit, she'd won me over in the first minutes I knew her.

"Do tell," I replied as I settled into the corner chair.

Miaka grinned widely at me. "I was thinking about buying a gallery."

"Really?" My eyebrows raised in surprise. "So, owning instead of creating, huh?"

"I don't think you could ever actually stop painting," Elizabeth said thoughtfully.

I nodded. "You're too talented."

Miaka had been selling her art online for years. Even now, mid-conversation, she was tapping away on her phone, and I felt certain another big sale was in the works. The fact that any of us owned a phone was almost ridiculous—as if we had anyone to call—but she liked staying plugged into the world.

"Being in charge of something seems like fun, you know?"

"I do," I said. "Ownership sounds incredibly appealing."

"Exactly!" Miaka typed and spoke at the same time. "Responsibility, individuality. It's all missing now, so maybe I can make up for it later."

I was about to say that we had plenty of responsibilities, but Elizabeth spoke up first.

"I had a new idea, too," she trilled.

"Tell us." Miaka set down her phone and climbed onto her as if they were puppies.

"I've decided I really like singing. I think I'd like to use it in a different way."

"You'd be a fantastic lead singer in a band."

Elizabeth sat up straight, nearly knocking Miaka to the floor. "That's exactly what I thought!"

I watched them, marveling at the fact that three such different people, born to different places and times and customs, could balance

one another out so well.

"What about you, Kahlen?"

"Huh?"

Miaka propped herself up. "Any new big dreams?"

We'd played this game hundreds of times as a way to keep our spirits up. I'd had dozens of ideas over the years. I'd considered being a doctor as a way to make amends for all the lives I'd taken. A dancer, so I could practice controlling my body in every way. A writer, so I could find a way to use my voice whether I spoke or not. An astronaut, in case I needed to put extra space between the Ocean and me.

But deep down I knew there was only one thing I really wanted. I eyed the large history book that rested by my favorite chair—the book I'd meant to take back into my room last night—making sure the bridal magazine inside was still hidden from sight.

I smiled and shrugged. "Same old, same old."

I swallowed as I set foot onto campus. Unlike some of my sisters, human ears set me on edge. But even now, I could hear Elizabeth's voice in my head. "You don't need to stay inside all the time. I'm not living that way," she had vowed, maybe two weeks into her new life with us. And she stayed true to her word, not only getting out herself, but making sure that the rest of us also had as much of a life as possible. Venturing out was half to appease her, half to indulge myself.

Our current home was right near a university, which was perfect for me. It meant slews of people wandering around on open lawns and mingling at picnic tables. I didn't feel the need to go to concerts or clubs or parties like Elizabeth and Miaka. I was content merely to be among the humans. If I sat under a tree, I could pretend to be one of them for hours.

I watched people pass, pleased we were in such a friendly area that some people waved at me for no reason at all. If I could have said hello to them—just one tiny, harmless word—the illusion would have been perfect.

". . . if she doesn't want to. I mean, why doesn't she just say something?" one girl asked the crowd of friends surrounding her. I imagined her a queen bee, the others hapless drones.

"You're totally right. She should have told you she didn't want to go instead of telling everyone else."

The queen flipped her hair. "Well, I'm done with her. I'm not playing those games."

I squinted after her, positive she was playing a completely different game, one she would certainly win.

“I’m telling you, man, we could design it.” A short-haired boy waved his hands enthusiastically at his friend.

“I don’t know.” This boy, slightly overweight and scratching a patch of skin on his neck, was walking fast. He might have been trying to outwalk his friend, but his counterpart was so light on his feet, so motivated, that he probably could have kept up with a rocket.

“Just a tiny investment, man. We could be the next big thing!”

I suppressed a smile.

When the crowds dispersed in the afternoon, I made my way to the library. Since moving to Miami, I’d gone there once or twice a week. I didn’t like to do my scrapbook research at the house. I’d made that mistake before, and Elizabeth had teased me mercilessly for being morbid.

“Why don’t you just go hunt for their corpses?” she’d said. “Or ask the Ocean to tell you their final thoughts. You want to know that, too?”

I understood her disgust. She saw my scrapbooks as an unhealthy obsession with the people we’d murdered. What I wished she understood was the way those people haunted me, the way the screams stayed with me long after the ships sank.

My goal today was Warner Thomas, the second-to-last person on the passenger list of the *Arcatia*. Warner turned out to be a relatively easy find. There were tons of people with the same name, but once I found all the social networking profiles with posts that stopped abruptly six months ago, I knew he was the right one. Warner was a string bean of a man who looked too shy to talk to people in person. He was listed as single everywhere, and I felt bad for thinking that made perfect sense.

The last entry on his blog was heartbreaking.

Sorry this is short, but I’m updating from my phone. Look at this sunset!

Just below that line, the sun melted into nothing on the back of the Ocean.

So much beauty in the world! Can’t help but think good things are on the way!

I nearly laughed. The expression in every picture I’d found made me think he’d never exclaimed anything in his life. But I couldn’t help wondering whether something had happened just before that fateful trip. Did he have a reason to think the direction of his life was changing? Or was it one of those lies we told from the safety of our rooms when no one could see how false it was?

I printed out the best-looking photo of him, a joke he’d posted, and some information about his siblings. *Sorry, Warner. I swear, it wasn’t me you died for.*

With that complete, I was able to turn my mind to something a little more fun. I had learned over the years to balance out each devastating piece of my scrapbook with something joyful. Last night, it was looking at dresses before pasting in the last of Kerry's pictures. Today, it was cakes. I found the culinary section and hoisted a stack of books to an empty space on the third floor. I pored over recipes, fondant work, construction. I built imaginary cakes, one at a time, indulging in the most consistent of my daydreams. The first, a classic vanilla and buttercream with pale-blue frosting and little white poppies. Three tiers. Very lovely. The next was five tiers, square, with black ribbon and costume jewelry broaches aligned vertically on the front. A bit more appropriate for an evening wedding.

"You having a party?"

I looked up to see a scruffy, blond-haired boy pushing a cart full of books. He had a flimsy name tag I couldn't read and was wearing the standard college-boy uniform of khaki pants and a button-up shirt with his sleeves cuffed around his elbows. No one tried anymore.

I held back my sigh. It was unavoidable, this part of the sentence. We were meant to draw people in, and men were particularly susceptible.

I looked down again without answering, hoping he'd take the hint. I hadn't chosen to sit at the back of the top floor because I felt like socializing.

"You look stressed. You could probably use a party."

I couldn't hold back my smirk. He had no idea. Unfortunately, he took that little smile as an invitation to continue.

He ran his hand through his hair, the modern-day equivalent of "Good day, miss," and pointed at the books. "My mom says the secret to making good baked stuff is to use a warm bowl. Not that I'd know. I can hardly make cereal without burning it."

His grin suggested that this was a little too true, and I was slightly charmed as he bashfully tucked a hand in his pocket.

It was a pity, really. I knew he meant no harm, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. But I was about to resort to the rudest move I had and simply walk away when he pulled that same hand back out and extended it to me.

"I'm Akinli, by the way," he said, waiting for me to respond. I gawked at him, not used to people pressing past my silence. "I know it's weird." He'd misread my confusion. "Family name. Kind of. It was a last name on my mom's side of the family."

He kept his palm outstretched, waiting. Typically my response would be to flee. But there was something about this boy that seemed . . . different. Maybe it was how his lips lifted into a smile without him seeming to even think about it, or the way his voice rolled warmly out

of him like clouds. I felt certain snubbing him would end up hurting my feelings more than his, that I'd regret it.

Cautiously, as if I might break us both, I took his hand, hoping he wouldn't notice how cool my skin was.

"And you are?" he prompted.

I sighed, sure this would end the conversation despite my kindest intentions. I signed my name, and his eyes widened.

"Oh, wow. So have you just been reading my lips this whole time?"

I shook my head.

"You can hear?"

I nodded.

"But you can't speak. . . . Umm, okay." He started patting at his pockets as I tried to fight the dread creeping down my spine. Unlike Miaka and Elizabeth, I didn't find getting this close to humans exciting. It only meant I was in a realm where I might break the rules.

There weren't many rules, but they were absolute. Stay silent in the presence of others, until it was time to sing. When the time came to sing, do it without hesitation. When we weren't singing, do nothing to expose our secret.

"Here we go," he announced, pulling out a pen. "I don't have any paper, so you'll have to write on my hand."

I stared at his skin, debating. Which name should I use? The one on the driver's license Miaka bought me online? The one I'd used to rent our current beach house? The one I'd used in the last town we'd stayed in? I had a hundred names to choose from.

Perhaps foolishly, I gave him my real one.

"Kahlen?" he read off his skin.

I nodded.

"That's pretty. Nice to meet you."

I gave him a thin smile, still uncomfortable. I didn't know how to do small talk.

"That's really cool that you're going to a traditional school even though you use sign language. I thought I was brave just getting out of state." He laughed at himself.

Even with how uneasy I was feeling, I admired his effort to keep the conversation going. It was more than most people would do in his situation. He pointed at the books again. "So, uh, if you ever have that party and need some help with your cake, I swear I could get my act together long enough not to ruin everything."

I raised one eyebrow at him.

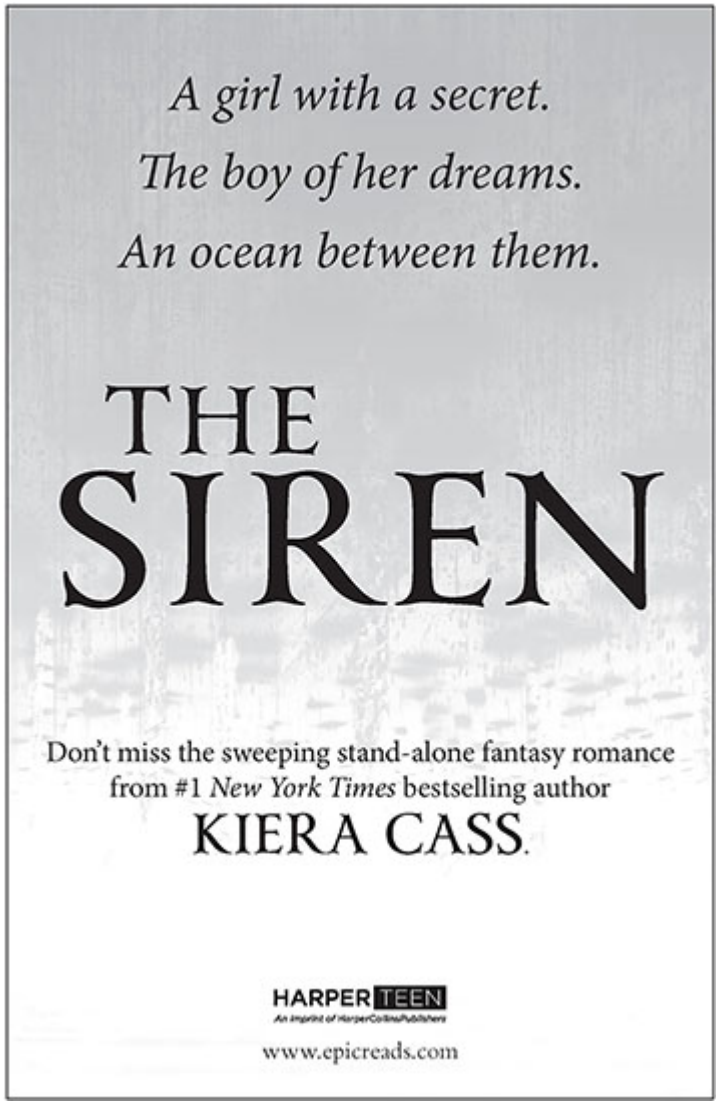
"I'm serious!" He laughed like I'd told a joke. "Anyway, good luck with that. See you around."

He waved sheepishly, then continued pushing his cart down the

aisle. I watched him go. I knew I'd remember his hair, a mess that looked windswept even in stillness, and the kindness in his eyes. And I'd hate myself for holding on to those details if he ever crossed my path on one of those dark days, days like those on which Kerry or Warner had encountered me.

Still, I was grateful. I couldn't recall the last time I'd felt so human.

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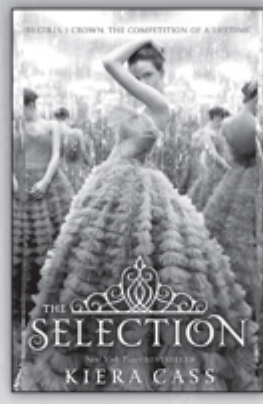
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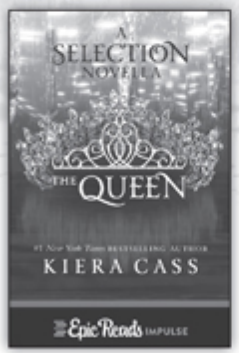
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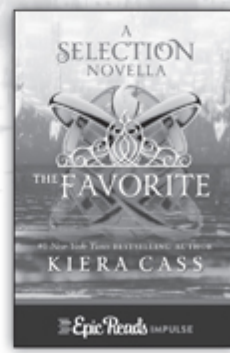
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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KIERA CASS is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of The Selection series, as well as the self-published fantasy novel *The Siren*. She is a graduate of Radford University and currently lives in Blacksburg, Virginia, with her family. Kiera has kissed approximately fourteen boys in her life. None of them were princes. You can learn more about Kiera's books, videos, and love of cake online at www.kieracass.com.

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The Siren

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